What I Learned About South Seas Women

By JAMES NORMAN HALL, Author of "KITCHENER'S MOB."

NEARLY every one, I imagine, has dreamed at times of the islands of the South Seas, and it would be interesting to know what sort of a picture the thought of those distant lands calls up in the minds of the average man or woman at home. I was given some information on this point recently by a friend whose business prevents him from being anything but a fireside traveler.

"The moment I think of the islands of the South Pacific," he said, "I see dimly a land of wooded peaks and sunny valleys filled with the odors of strange flowers and the music of falling water and surrounded by a mirror-like lagoon.

"Wandering up one of those enchanted valleys is a white man, a beach-comber, and hand in hand with him as he strolls through the shaded solitudes is the dusky maiden of his dreams. Her black hair falls free from her shoulders and her lithe form is clad in the scantiest of frocks. Or perhaps he is alone, the beach-comber, sitting, lost in reverie, by th e bright waters of the lagoon, listening to the wind soughing through the fronds of the palms. The morning passes, its changes marked only by the leaping of a fish or the resounding thud of a falling cocoanut. He is roused at length by a ripple of girlish laughter, and looking up quickly he catches a glimpse of a pair of brown eyes peeping shyly at him through a barrier of foliage. 'How beautiful they were!' he thinks during the long afternoon.

"Twilight comes gradually on, and still lost in dream he returns to the village. There is a slithering of bare feet in the moonlit streets, and from afar he hears the deep throbbing of drums, a burst of song,

A Polynesian girl.

making an appeal to old savage instincts. These sounds die away gradually, and the silence of the tropic night is broken only by the distant booming of the surf on the reef. There you are! That's my impression of the South Seas gained through the reading of books.

"All the South Sea writers from Herman Melville down have struck the note of feminism. Well, what about the women? Are they still the same gay, fickle, flirtatious, impulsive little vamps they used to be by all accounts?

I knew that my friend would get round to this question. It is the outspoken first one, or the discreet "by the way" last one asked every returning traveler from the islands. "The Women of the South Seas" is a subject of perennial interest seemingly; and those who know them only through books believe them all to be sirens and Circes of the most abandoned sort. The common belief is that morality as the word is defined with us doesn't exist among the women of the islands; but this is far from the truth. A Polynesian woman is capable of making a cheerful helpmate, a patient and loving mother and a wife as faithful as any in the world. She is more likely than not to be all of these things provided that two conditions are fulfilled: Her husband must keep his side of the bargain and there must be children in the house.

In thickly populated places and in the complexities of civilized society we often lose sight of these two essentials to a happy marriage, but the island woman never does. She lives in a primitive society, in thinly populated lands where everything is known; where gossip runs from island to island with mysterious telepathic speed.

If her husband exchanges so much as a word with a possible rival she is sure to hear of it, just as she is sure to hear of his indiscretions, and she repays her husband in kind. If the years pass without bringing children, no matter how faithful her husband may have been, to expect her to be so is the most extravagant of hopes. It must be remembered that she is the product of centuries of savage life and that she has been untouched by the conventionalities of a competitive and populous society. Her point of view, in other words, is that of a wholly normal human being. Being unrefined, and not at all a lady in the Victorian sense, the girl of the islands, when she arrives at a marriageable age, dreams of romantic love like the young girls of every land, but she thinks of babies even more. She wants them and means to have them at any cost. Her yearning for children of her own is as instinctive and wholesome as breathing.

There is no place in the world that I have seen where babies are welcomed as they are among the islanders of the Pacific, all kinds and conditions of babies. And this love of children for the children's sake gives rise to a peculiar difference between their way of looking at one world prevalent problem and our own way. With us a straying daughter returning sorrowfully to her father may face her family with some assurance of forgiveness if she does not bring with her a small living token of her mistake. In Polynesia it is just the other way around. She is certain of forgiveness and a warm welcome if she does bring the baby. Whenever the chance arises, the islanders compete for the joy of adopting a child. No baby in need, however unattractive it may be, will fail to have the offer of a dozen homes.

During a two years' residence among the islands of the eastern Pacific, I was continually making comparisons between Polynesian ideas of propriety and our own, and I was surprised to find that in many respects theirs are more rigid. For example, it would never occur to a Polynesian wife that her husband might be amusing himself in a harmless flirtation with another woman. Harmless flirtations are the rather dubious product of the highest civilization and are inconceivable to the primitive mind. Where there is smoke, the Polynesian woman believes, the fire is always to be found. Platonic friendship between the sexes is equally inconceivable, and the explanation of its principles would meet with incredulous laughter. As another sidelight on the subject of propriety, I must mention the fact that the island woman feels no particular animus toward an erring husband. Her anger is concentrated upon the other woman, and the only satisfactory punishment is administered with a stick. When that is over, the household may settle down to the old peaceful life, but with an added watchfulness on the distaff side.

The typical island woman is not the little vamp but the woman approaching middle age, an industrious and loyal wife and the mother of a healthy brood of children. She is taller and stronger, I should say, than the average woman at

The five o'clock bath.

home, and capable of doing heavy work without fatigue. The beauty of her girlhood is forever gone, but often, long after the middle years, her dark eyes are still full of life, her hair superb, her teeth firm and white. During the hours of the day when she is fishing or copra making, her dress is usually no more than a strip of gaudy print cloth tucked under her arms and falling to her knees. The transformation comes at 5 o'clock when every islander bathes and changes to freshly laundered clothing. In the evening you will see her strolling with her husband on the road, her hair carefully brushed and plaited, hanging in two thick braids below her waist. About her shoulders she wears a light wrap of embroidered Chinese silk, and her waistless frock is as fresh as soap and water can make it.

At first glance you might think her only a good humored brown savage neatly dressed in goods purchased at a trader's store. No doubt she is a savage in many respects, but even so, she has a surprising stock of practical information about all sorts of things. I doubt whether many women at home know more about babies and their rearing, for in the islands there are no doctors upon whom she can call, no baby clinics which she can attend.

With the cocoanut and various herbs and grasses she can make remedies for every common ill. Her sons and husband are witnesses to her skill in making hats. She knows the whole process, from the gathering of the special cane in the mountains to the last word in fine and complicated weaves. A man is no authority in such matters, but I will venture to say that as a seamstress she is ahead of the average American woman. She has to be skillful, for there are no modistes in Polynesia. She owns a sewing machine of the latest model and with its help makes her own clothes, frocks for the children and her husband's Sunday garb of white. As for hand-sewing it needs an old-fashioned French woman to equal her.

It would be beneath her dignity as a wife and mother to swarm up a cocoanut palm, but if she wanted a drinking nut, and none of her children were at hand, you would see her scurry up a sixty foot trunk without the least difficulty. She can swim and dive like a seal, handle her frail canoe in stormy seas, and is a past mistress at the kind of fishing relegated to the women among her people.

I used to amuse myself with expeditions after the giant clam, called the *tridacna*, the great frilled edge ones which grow to such a size that the shells which the missionaries take home to France are often used for baptismal fonts. One morning as I was getting my canoe ready to go out, an old friend dropped in—a Paumotuan woman of sixty, as slender and vivacious as a girl. She wanted to go along and I consented, thinking it would amuse her to sit in the canoe and watch. Presently we dropped anchor in fairly shallow water, at a place where the bottom of the lagoon was studded with clams. The old grandmother sniffed the air, drenched with the salt spray drifting across the reef. "Aue! te miti e!" she said. "Ah, the smell of the sea! I could imagine myself back on the Law island where I was born!"

The next moment she was overboard, clothes and all, my water goggles over her eyes, my small crowbar in her hand. It was I who sat in the canoe and did the watching. I was half her age, and yet I rather prided myself on my ability to pry off one of these huge clams and bring it to the surface without taking breath. She broke loose clam after clam, opened them, removed the meat, and in all skewered a half dozen on the crowbar before coming to the surface.

When the basket was full we paddled home, and she told me how in her younger days she often went diving for pearl shells with her husband and could remain under water at a depth of one hundred feet for as long as two and a half minutes. I doubted this at the time but later at the great annual diving season in the Low Archipelago I saw women who equaled and even bettered this record. And during this time they were at work, moving over the floor of the lagoon, gathering pearl shell oysters and putting them into baskets and keeping a wary lookout on all sides for sharks.

The women of the South Seas are very much like those of other countries, other nationalities; and while this is contrary to popular opinion, it is none the less true that a white man—even a beach comber—may live among them if he wishes to in perfect safety.

Facts About the Argentine Republic

THE ARGENTINE REPUBLIC: ITS DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESS. By Pierre Denis. Charles Scribner's Sons.

IT is unfortunately true that even the fairly well read modern North American has but scanty knowledge of our great neighbors to the far South, although there is an increasing supply of informative literature on the subject. Dr. Denis contributes a highly useful volume, which modestly announces itself as no more than a "geographical introduction" to a more comprehensive study of the Argentine nation. He is primarily concerned with colonization, natural resources, their development and possibilities, but he provides sufficient background, and the book is far from being a mere compendium of facts.

The position of Argentina is peculiar in that while immigration was stopped by the war, and European capital was also heavily withdrawn, the influx of money from the United States being entirely inadequate to make up the loss, there has nevertheless been a remarkable storing of reserve capital due to the extraordinarily favorable trade balances. It creates an unusual situation and makes prediction as to the future difficult.